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# CUICATECO INDIAN TRIBE

by Marjorie Davis

The Cuicateco Indians of Mexico are a tribe without songs, yet they are known as the singing people. The tribal language is a tonal one with many word couplets, triplets and quadruplets which sound alike except for a difference in tone. To put Cuicateco words to existing tunes in other languages would be a total loss since the music would mar the meaning so much that it could not be understood.

For example: here are a few lists of words that sound alike except for their tones.

1. cá'á yá 'he spoke'  
ca'á yà 'he speaks'  
cà'á yà 'he is going to go out'  
ca'á yà 'he will be in a place'
2. chæ à ti 'thick'  
chæ à tí 'inside'  
chæ à tí 'my stomach'  
chæ æ tí 'the animal climbed'
3. nduùcù 'fruit (chirimoya)'  
ndúúcu 'with'  
nduucu 'planting stick'  
nduucú 'with me'  
ndúúcu 'papaya'
4. n'gíinu yà 'he is snoring'  
n'giinu yà 'he is planting'  
n'giinu yà 'he is bad'  
n'gíinú yà 'he is hoeing'

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5.	ndaàcá yà	'he went out'
	ndaaca yà	'he asked'
	ndaacá yà	'he found'
	ndaà-ca yà	'more came'
6.	túuu	'stone'
	túuú	'thick'
	tuuú	'full of weeds (place)'
7.	yiicù	'medicine'
	yíicú	'river'
	yiicu	'hill'
8.	yaà	'snow'
	yâà	'town'
	yáá	'plenty'
	yaá	'thorn'
	yaá	'it filtered'
9.	yâ'â	'tree'
	yâ'â	'land'
	ya'â	'fire'
	ʔíiyú	'star'
	ʔíiyu	'turkey'
	nųuní	'pitaya'
	nųuní	'beans'
	nųunì	'water'
	ndaa yà	'he arrived'
	ndaá yà	'he was put out'

To compose songs in Cuicateco the relativity of the tones on the words must be preserved in the music. While attempting to write and compose songs in this language I started with a very simple song of thanks which we sing at mealtimes. The phrases in Cuicateco are very closely knit together because of their tone sequence phrase patterns.

For this reason I used the phrases as units for writing the tune. Each phrase is marked off from each other phrase by a vertical line.

N'dyuùs | i'tee yú 'gracia | 'n'dii |  
 God give we thanks to-you

'yɛ'e chi 'che'e yú |  
 for that-which eat we

nicu i?'tée nì 'vida | 's'ɥùú |  
 and give you life to-us

nicu cu'ndæ æ nì cui'dado | 's'ɥùú. |  
 and take-care you care of-us.

- ['] 'stress written before the stressed syllable'  
 ['] 'high tone on vowel'  
 [ ] 'unmarked mid tone on vowel'  
 [`] 'a. low tone on vowel'  
 b. when occurring on consonant it marks a syllabic consonant. (I could have chosen the high tone symbol and it would not have made any difference.)

Underlined words are borrowings from Spanish. The steps used are as follows.

1. Stress was written on every stressed syllable.
2. The vowels were numbered for timing, beginning with the first vowel after each stressed syllable, as written under the vowels in the music below. Each stress marks the beginning of a measure. (Note that the highest recorded number is 6.)
3. The first stressed vowel was given two musical beats where necessary.
4. Since phrase-initial high can be raised a little higher than its tone in speaking, it is raised one note higher for additional notes in the tune.
5. Where there are only two vowels to a measure the vowels are given double timing; thus meaning was not destroyed.
6. Tone levels are changed from phrase to phrase but each tone phrase, initial or final, must preserve its relationship to the tone that precedes or follows.
7. Tone levels are also changed within the phrase to make the music more melodious.

Handwritten musical notation on three staves, featuring lyrics and fingerings.

**Staff 1:**

N̄'-dyu--ùs / i'--tee yú gracia n'dii / ye'è chi che'e yú  
 1 1 2 / 3 12 3 1 2 12 1 2 3 1 2 3

**Staff 2:**

nicu i'--tée yà vi---da 's'ùùù / nicu cu'--ndæ---æ nì 4  
 4 5 6 12 3 1 2 123 4 5 6 1 2 3 4

**Staff 3:**

cui'--da---do 's'ù--ù---ù  
 4 1 2 1 2 3

## Conclusion:

The music actually follows the tones and tone patterns of the language by simply transferring the relative pitch to exact pitch and from speaking to singing. The stress and rhythmic patterns of speech are followed in a way which makes each word easy to understand.

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The Cuicateco language is in the Mixtecan language family. The tribe is located in the district of Cuicatlan in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. Sr. Felix Palacio, a man about 65 years old, is the informant used. The material used was gathered in 1968, written in 1969.